
Old Houses, Linguistics, and the Relevance of Literature in Singapore:

The Stylistic Analysis of One Poem

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This article seeks to demonstrate how a language-focused approach to examining a poem, based on a socially relevant linguistic model, can reveal the social and cultural relevance of literature in a school curriculum. Through a stylistic analysis, based on Systemic Functional Grammar, of Old House at Ang Siang Hill, a poem by one of Singapore's foremost writers, it examines how language patterns and their secondary patterning encode important socio-historical information and thematic issues of relevance to National Education, a key concern of Singapore schools. Thus, it reveals and suggests how literature can be used to meet this concern, as well as another key concern, the stimulation of critical thinking, while simultaneously enhancing awareness of the power of language in the construction of meaning. In so doing, it suggests how literature should have a central place in the school curriculum.

Introduction

The last two decades or so have seen the decline in Singapore of Literature in English as a subject in secondary schools. Compulsory in the first two years, its enrolment at the upper secondary level, where it is an optional subject, has decreased and remained low since the mid-1990s. The reasons are many, but the most immediate and apparent one is that Literature has seemed to be one of the most difficult subjects in which to obtain a good grade at the crucial national exit examinations. Behind this, however, have been deeper and far more fundamental problems related to the question of relevance.

To begin with, as Koh (1995) points out, the literature studied appeared to be increasingly remote from the social and cultural milieu of the average Singaporean pupil. For a long time, most of texts remained those of the traditional British "canon," and it is not difficult to imagine the difficulties faced by modern Singaporean students in identifying with and understanding the experiences and perspectives embedded in them. Although there has been a discernible shift away from the "canonical" focus, the subject is still groping in its search for relevance to the everyday lived experience of the teenage pupils.

More crucially, the problems of relevance relate to the question of *agendas* for teaching literature. Lin (2001) gives an amalgamated account of how the agendas have evolved in Singapore, based chiefly on Koh (1995), but also drawing on three papers by Griffith, Holden, and Yahya in Chin and Chua (1999). Those familiar with the work of the post-colonial theorist Edward Said would no doubt recognize the major influence from which such an account is drawn. Its historical perspective aims to shed light not only on the Singapore experience, but also on similar experiences elsewhere of the alienation of Literature in secondary education.

Literature as a school subject, the account suggests, began in Singapore and other parts of

the British Empire as an instrument of British colonialism, with one primary aim being that of instilling a sense of belonging to the Empire—hence, the near-exclusive dominance of British works in the curriculum. With the passing of colonialism, however, this agenda gave way to one which celebrated the humanising and aesthetic worth of literature, with the works of the “canon” still dominant and the works of, say, Shakespeare, seen as valuable to developing unproblematically “universal” values of truth and beauty—literature in service of improving pupils as human beings.

For many, however, such humanistic-aesthetic concerns seemed far too esoteric and therefore irrelevant to the more pragmatic concerns such as nation-building as well as economic and technological development. The place of literature in schools, for them, was largely to supplement English language teaching and enhance the English language ability of the pupils through providing the “best” examples of good English. In other words, the motivation was pragmatic, given that in Singapore, proficiency in English was and is seen as vital to economic survival and success, both for individuals and for the nation. Such a motivation, however, is again not unproblematic, since it is not always easy to see how the language of literary texts is relevant to other more functional discourses. Besides, if extending language learning were the purpose of literature, why not just incorporate literature into English language lessons? Why literature as a distinct subject of study?

The result of all this is that the teaching of literature became a minefield of contradicting and often unexamined assumptions, since the teachers themselves would have been variously influenced by these differing and dominant agendas, each of which, as has been suggested, can seem far from relevant to Singapore society or to the average Singaporean pupil. Poor examination results, consequently, would not be surprising, given the difficulties that pupils would have in finding significance. Thus, in many schools, Literature in English was, and continues to be, retained as a subject only at the lower secondary level, merely aiming to provide a form of language enjoyment.

Can and should Literature be returned to a more central place in the secondary school curriculum? One answer is yes, if it could be given back its more social and cultural function. It is salient to recall that English literature was introduced for precisely such a function: that is what inculcating a sense of allegiance to the Empire was. Why not then subvert the colonialist agenda, and use literature for one’s own nation, culture and society? After all, it might be asserted that in most cultures, the socialising function is one of the most central roles of literature, oral or written.

Indeed, the introduction in the late 1990s of a key initiative that has remained a central imperative in education in Singapore not only offered the opportunity for returning such a function to literature, but also made it *pressing* to do so. The initiative was the introduction of what the government calls “National Education” (NE in short), which seeks to address what it perceived to be a lack of national consciousness on the part of the young. Not surprisingly, a large number of papers at the last major national conference on the teaching of literature in 1997 (see Chua and Chin, 1999) called for measures that would enable literature to be central not only to this initiative, but also to another vital initiative and imperative introduced at the same time—that of teaching creative and critical thinking.

Many of the papers proposed the selection of more texts by local writers, arguing that this would lead to classroom work of social and cultural relevance and significance. Indeed, one paper (Singh, 1997) asserted that this was almost a truism. Some also suggested approaches to pedagogy that might realize social and cultural aims, as well as encourage creative and critical thinking. Most of the presenters would admit other texts, including those of the so-called British “canon,” but also advocated interrogating them from the national and cultural perspectives of the readers—i.e., in the case of Singapore, from modern Singaporean perspectives.

Many of these claims and proposals can be said to be powerful and persuasive. However, the

arguments and proposals remained largely generalised and abstract, with little close examination of particular texts and situations to justify their arguments. Moreover, their support of a social agenda needs to be considered in a context where those persuaded by other agendas are still a significant influence. In other words, even as a more “NE” agenda is advanced, those with more humanistic, aesthetic and linguistic concerns still need to be taken into account and be persuaded, for instance, that local works do indeed possess sufficient “literary merit” to be studied. For this, again, the texts actually studied (or to be studied) in schools need to be examined closely and hence assessed.

Through the study of one poem by a well-known Singaporean poet, the rest of this paper aims to show how such an analysis can be done in a rigorous fashion, providing hard evidence of linguistic patterning that demonstrates not only that the claims can be supported, but also that there is artistic merit in a text proposed for school study. Departing from traditional literary criticism, the study employs stylistics, that is, the application of linguistics to literary analysis. It does so in the belief that traditional literary criticism often fails to provide sufficiently rigorous grounds for argument, often relying more on the critic’s intuitions and rhetorical abilities, so that even if sound, the readings and assessments can be easily open to question. In particular, the analysis uses a linguistic theory capable of addressing the many issues at hand—questions related to culture and society, meaning, literary artistry, language, and thinking. This theoretical framework will be briefly outlined.

Systemic Functional Grammar and Verbal Art

(Halliday, 1994; Hasan, 1985)

The analysis employs a socially-oriented model of linguistics, namely Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), most definitively described in Halliday (1994). Further, it draws on Hasan’s (1985) application of the grammar to literature or verbal art.

SFG proposes that language is a system of resources for making meaning in context. Thus, what Halliday calls the *lexico-grammar* is seen as intimately related to *meanings*, which are in turn intimately related to *contexts of situation* embedded in *contexts of culture* in which language is used.

As illustrated in Figure 1, SFG defines context of situation and meaning each in terms of three aspects. Each aspect of context is seen to inter-relate directly with one aspect of meaning. The three aspects of meaning in turn inter-relate with three perspectives of the lexico-grammar at the clause level.

Conversely, each clause thus has a tri-partite “message” or meaning, adduced by looking at the clause from three different perspectives, and this tri-partite meaning reveals the three aspects of the context of situation it encodes. Thus, the total meaning of a text may be adduced by aggregating the tri-partite meanings of all its clause patterns.

However, in the case of literary texts, Hasan (1985) points out that this constitutes only a first level of semiosis leading to a “zero-level” reading—what in layman’s terms is merely the literal meaning of the text, involving who says what to whom and in what circumstances. Literary texts involve verbal artistry that enables a second level of semiosis through a patterning of the first level clause patterns. Successful artistry leads to consistent foregrounding of a text’s most significant clauses or “messages,” allowing ascription of symbolic intent to them, and hence interpretation of the text’s sayings at the level of theme—i.e., its “deeper meaning” at the level of comment on, say, society or human nature. The revealed themes, it must be added, would in turn reveal the deeper social and human concerns arising from the context of the text’s creation. All this is summed up

Figure 1: Relationship between Context, Meaning and Lexicogrammar

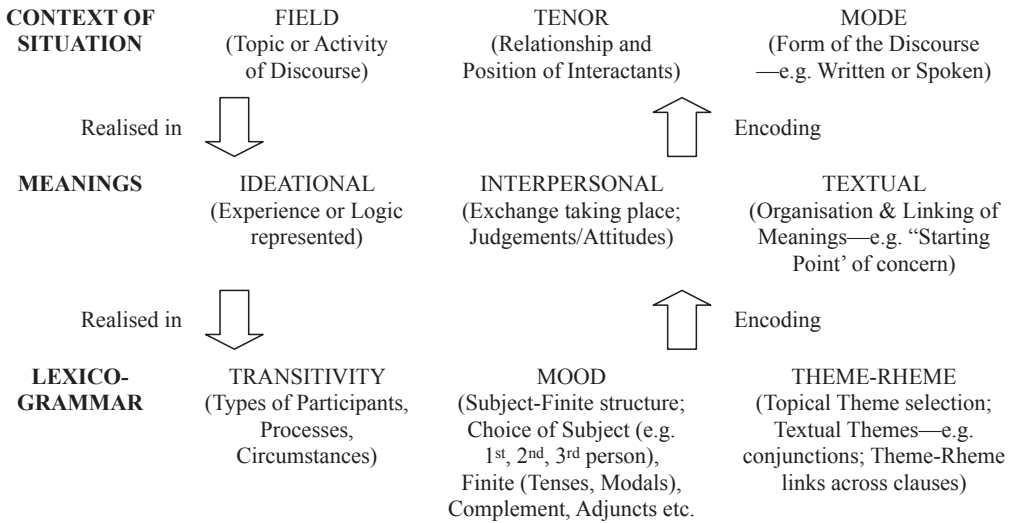
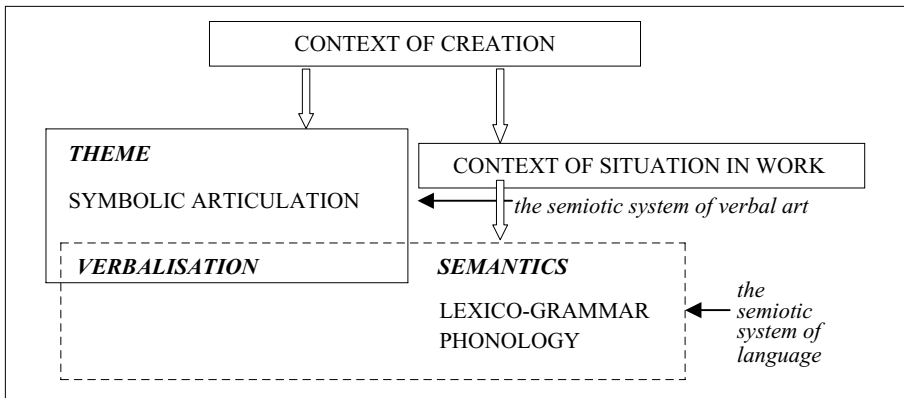


Figure 2: Hasan’s (1985) Model Elaborated to Show Context of Situation



in Figure 2, which is an elaboration of Hasan’s (1985) depiction of verbal art and language (Lin, 2001).

It is clear that while Halliday’s linguistic model allows social relevance to be probed through relating language use to social context, Hasan’s model for verbal art allows aesthetic construction of deeper sayings of potentially humanising significance to be probed as well. In so doing, the linguistic basis is laid bare for critical evaluation, enabling critical thinking.

Thus, the analysis that follows uses the models described, in order to address the competing agendas hitherto highlighted, even while addressing the primary question of returning the social function of literature to a central position.

The Analysis Of “Old House At Ang Siang Hill”

Old House at Ang Siang Hill

an unusual house this is
dreams are here before you sleep
tread softly
into the three-storeyed gloom
sit gently
on the straits born furniture
imported from china
speak quietly
to the contemporary occupants

they are not afraid of you
waiting for you to go
before they dislocate your intentions
so what if this is
your grandfather’s house
his ghost doesn’t live here anymore
your family past is
superannuated grime
which increases with time
otherwise nothing adds or subtracts
the bricks and tiles
until re-development
which will greatly change
this house-that-was
dozens like it along the street
the next and the next as well

nothing much will be missed
eyes not tradition tell you this

Arthur Yap

Known Context of Creation and Prima facie Reading

Ang Siang Hill sits in the heart of Chinatown and resonates with the history of Singapore’s Chinese immigrant forefathers who came in poverty but had dreams of making their fortune here. The title refers to its historic shophouses built in the early part of the twentieth century and which once housed many of these immigrant forefathers responsible for the making of modern Singapore. Many had fallen into general disrepair by the 1970s, although they continued to be inhabited. Hence, urban renewal threatened to destroy many of them. The poem makes obvious references to some of these things.

However, today, many of them have been conserved and turned into modern shops, restaurants, and even a boutique hotel, albeit with their facades intact and spruced up. Thus, there is a disjunction between the context of the poem’s creation and the context of today’s students’

readings of the poem. The cryptic references in the poem, written some time in the late 1970s or early 1980s in the heyday of urban renewal, would indeed puzzle students, prompting questions and research.

However, is this all that pupils can gain from a study of the poem? It is essential to address the question of what the poem articulates at the deepest level of meaning, and *how* it does so, before this question can be adequately answered.

Prima facie, it seems evident that the poem addresses the question of urban renewal and the potential destruction of the heritage represented by the old house. The attitude of the poem towards this question, however, seems somewhat less obvious, and the poem may perhaps be criticised for an ambiguity that springs from a lack of commitment: is the poet for or against urban renewal?

On the one hand, there are the opening lines seeming to suggest that the old house deserves preservation—it is “unusual” and a place for dreams. This seems to be reinforced by the instructions to “tread softly,” “sit gently,” and “speak quietly,” all suggesting an attitude of some reverence. On the other hand, however, there are the closing lines which suggest quite the contrary: with “re-development” that will “greatly change” the house and all those around it, “nothing much will be missed.” Sentimentality will be swept aside in the face of reality as “eyes not tradition tell you this.”

Is the poet guilty of inconsistency, or are there subtleties that such a reading misses, subtleties which are the result of verbal artistry? Is the poem in fact imbued with complexities of meaning worth thinking about, and which pupils consequently ought to be sensitised to in order for their thinking to be stimulated? The lexico-grammatical analysis that follows addresses such questions. Table 1 presents the clauses identified in the poem and referred to in the analysis.

Table 1: Clause Division in *Old House at Ang Siang Hill*

<i>Line</i>	<i>clause no.</i>	<i>clause</i>
<i>STANZA ONE</i>		
<i>A</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>an unusual house this is/</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>dreams are here</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>before you sleep/</i>
<i>C/D</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>tread softly/ into the three-storeyed gloom</i>
<i>E/F/G</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>sit gently/ on the straits born furniture/ [5a/</i>
<i>G</i>	<i>5a</i>	<i>[imported from china/]</i>
<i>H/I</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>speak quietly/ to the contemporary occupants/</i>
<i>STANZA TWO</i>		
<i>A</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>they are not afraid of you/</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>waiting for you to go/</i>
<i>C</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>before they dislocate your intentions/</i>
<i>D/E</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>so what</i>
<i>E</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>if this is/ your grandfather's house/</i>
<i>F</i>	<i>6</i>	<i>his ghost doesn't live here anymore/</i>
<i>G/H/I</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>your family past is/ superannuated grime/ [6a]</i>
<i>I</i>	<i>7a</i>	<i>[which increases with time/]</i>
<i>J-P</i>	<i>8</i>	<i>otherwise nothing adds or subtracts / the bricks and tiles/ until redevelopment/ [8a]</i>
<i>M/N/O/P</i>	<i>8a</i>	<i>[which will greatly change/ this house-that-was/ dozens like it along the street/ the next and the next as well]</i>
<i>STANZA THREE</i>		
<i>A</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>nothing much will be missed/</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>eyes not tradition tell you this</i>

Textual Meanings

The analysis begins with looking at the clause from the perspective of its *Theme-Rheme* structure, and the textual meanings this yields.

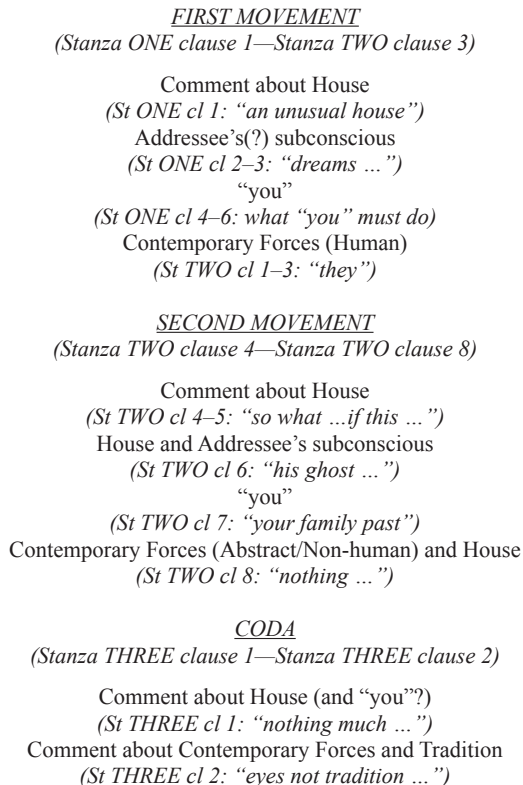
Theme is defined as the first element of the clause and the “starting point” of its message. SFG distinguishes between an obligatory *Topical Theme* (the first element that is a noun or nominal group, verb or verbal group, or adverb or adverbial) and possible *Textual Themes* (conjunctions preceding the Topical Theme).

Analysis reveals that almost all the Topical Themes in the main clauses in the poem are related to one of the following, either by direct reference or association (Process for which it is responsible, or something “belonging” to it): the house; the subconscious; “you”; and a third party, whether human (the contemporary occupants) or otherwise (dreams, the various abstract forces, the superannuated grime, “eyes not tradition”), and either belonging to the contemporary or to the past.

It is also observed that the first two Textual Themes both pertain to temporal sequence (“before” in both stanza ONE line 2 and stanza TWO line 3), while from stanza TWO line 4 onwards, the Textual Themes are more commonly associated with logic and reason (“so” in stanza TWO line 4, “if” in stanza TWO line 5, “otherwise” in stanza TWO line 10).

Taking all these together, a distinct structuring of the poem into two parallel movements, plus a coda of sorts is suggested, as in Figure 3 below:

Figure 3: Overall Structure of *Old House at Ang Siang Hill*



From the pattern of Theme selections, some generalisations about the main underlying concerns of the poem may be proposed. Examining first the selection of Topical Themes in main clauses, it is clear that the starting point of these concerns is the house of the poem's title—"an unusual house": this is made evident by its being given first prominence at the start of the poem.

This prominence is then emphasised again at the start of the second and third thematic drifts or movements: "this," referring to the house, is Theme in stanza TWO clause 5 and "nothing much," implicitly from the house, is Theme in stanza THREE clause 1. This suggests that the poem's main concern is with the house itself—and questions pertaining to, for instance, what it is like, how it is to be viewed, what meaning it holds naturally arise and wait to be answered.

Further emphasis is made by *foregrounding*: "an unusual house" is a strongly marked Theme in that such a clause construction with the Complement coming first, is highly unusual: Halliday (1994) regards Complement as the "'most marked' type of Theme in a declarative clause." Thus right at the outset, the status of the old house as the centre of all concern in the poem is clearly enunciated.

The second Theme at the beginning of the poem (stanza ONE clause 2), as mentioned, is "dreams." This is paralleled in what has been identified as the Second Movement by "his ghost" (stanza TWO clause 6) (a reference to "your grandfather" in the previous clause) coming after "this" in stanza TWO clause 5. But whose dreams? While not unequivocally clear, the dreams are associated with "you" in the next clause by conjunction. Dreams and ghosts both inhabit the world beyond the natural—the preternatural and the supernatural—and often, are associated with psyche. Thus, the Thematic focus seems in both cases to shift to the psyche or world of the consciousness of "you": the poem's interest seems now to extend in some way to how the house relates to the psyche of the addressee "you."

That the addressee "you" is now somehow part of another important point of departure for the concerns of the poem is emphasised by a series of ensuing clauses in which Processes where "you" is the agent are dominant as Themes (stanza ONE clauses 4, 5, and 6). Again, this is paralleled in the Second Movement by "your family past" (stanza TWO clause 7) being the next Theme. Although the addressee "you" is not directly referred to, his relevance is clearly implied. Thus the poem's concerns are extended beyond the house and its relationship to the addressee's psyche, to how the addressee's actions, behaviour and heritage are relevant to it.

Finally, the Thematic focus in the First Movement shifts to a third party set of participants, "they" (stanza TWO lines 1–3), identified previously in the Rheme of stanza ONE clause 6 as "the contemporary occupants" of the house. Their role—the role of the contemporary—in relation to the house is now made salient. Note, however, that this is only in the last place of prominence: it may be theorised that they are relevant only in so far as they impact how the addressee is to relate to the house, the central focus of concern. Again, there appears to be a parallel in the second part of the poem: following "your family past" is a Theme that may again be described as third party and from the contemporary world—"nothing" (stanza TWO clause 8).

It has already been noted that the selection of Textual Themes, scanty as these may be, suggest a concern with mere sequentiality in the First Movement, implying perhaps that the speaker is merely concerned with presenting what is, whereas in the Second Movement, logic and reasoning is suggested, implying perhaps an attempt at rationalisation. Further, while the parallels between the two movements have been emphasised in the preceding discussion, important differences have also been noted. Both movements start with a focus on the house, then move on to focusing on the addressee in some way, and finally focus on third parties from the contemporary world. While the First Movement's Themes, however, are grounded in elements of the here and now (the addressee

himself, the contemporary occupants of the house), the Second Movement's Themes are more abstract—the addressee's family past, abstract forces of the present. Thus aggregately, what appears to be happening in the poem is that the real encounter between the house and its occupants, and the addressee, becomes the premise on which the addressee's relationship with the house, and the impact of larger abstract forces on this, is discussed.

All this then leads to a third movement of only two clauses, the first having a reference again to the house as Theme, followed by a reference to "eyes" and "tradition"—contemporary reality and the old world—in a post-modified Theme. In the light of what has gone on before, the selection of Themes here appears to suggest that when all is said and done, the concerns of the poem reduce to questions involving the relative places of the house, contemporary reality, and tradition.

It should also be observed that while the house is Thematised and given first prominence at the beginning of each movement, it does *not* become Topical Theme anywhere else. This suggests that while it is of central focus, it is *not* to be of interest for or in itself: rather, what is more salient is how other participants stand in relation to it.

Thus far then, the following generalisation may be made on the basis of examining the selection of Themes in the first two movements: *The poem is centrally concerned with the status of the old house at Ang Siang Hill and what it represents, and in particular with what it means for individuals like the addressee with past connections to it, and how other forces—contemporary ones—impact this relationship. It is concerned not just with presenting what is, but with reasoning out what should be in the face of larger impersonal forces, those of contemporary realities and tradition.*

Two further salient observations may be made. Both concern the role of the addressee. The first is that while he is salient to a number of Thematic choices, only once is he directly Thematised ("you" in stanza ONE clause 3). Elsewhere, as already noted, it is Processes involving him ("tread," "sit," and "speak") or something he "possesses" ("your family past") that are Thematised. Thus, he is hardly in himself a starting point for the speaker's concerns. In fact, in the Thematic choices for what may be considered the conclusion of the poem, the third stanza and movement, he is ignored entirely.

The second observation concerns the question of how the addressee is related to the old house: it is only in the *Rheme* of stanza TWO clause 5 that the information is given—it is his grandfather's house. The *Rheme* is typically the portion of the clause where "New" information is supplied, and given how intimately the house is related to the addressee, it is rather surprising that such "New" information is supplied so late in the poem.

From these two observations, it appears as that in the economy of the poem, or to the speaker, this close relation is of little importance—the addressee is marginalised. How this becomes an important part of what the poem says will become clear in relation to further observations in the other two perspectives of the lexico-grammar, to which the discussion will now turn.

Interpersonal Meanings

Thus far, the second person in the poem has only been loosely referred to as "you" or the addressee. But who exactly might "you" refer to, or, alternatively, who might the addressee of the poem be? And where does he stand in relation to the speaker, the other participants in the poem, and the reader? Who is the speaker in the poem in the first place? Is it the poet who is speaking and addressing the reader, so that "you" refers to the reader? Or does "you" refer to an implied or constructed interlocutor, and is the speaker a constructed persona rather than the poet himself?

These and other important questions have to be addressed in order to understand how the

poem stands as symbolic representation, an important step to understanding its deepest level of meaning. It is the grammar of the *Mood* structure and its elements that provides answers.

Typically, in English, a clause structured in the *declarative* mood (i.e., Subject followed by the verb Finite) is used to make a statement, one in the *imperative* (i.e., beginning with the verb Predicate) to give a command, and one in the *interrogative* (i.e., starting with a WH-subject or with verb Finite followed by Subject) an offer or question.

Although the clauses in the poem are largely declarative, three imperative clauses and one interrogative construct an implied interlocutor who belongs *in* the poem as co-present and part of the exchange with the speaker, since the typical speech functions of these two Mood structures typically demand an immediacy of response or exchange. This implied interlocutor could, of course, be the reader who is thus invited to respond to the commands and question, but whether this is the case or not needs to be determined by reference to other grammatical features.

Closer examination of the elements of Mood (in particular Subject and verb Finite) reveals that the implied interlocutor is *not* the reader. What is most significant is the dominance of the simple Present Tense throughout: in all but one of the finite clauses the simple Present Tense is selected. One use of the Present Tense is in commentary on the here-and-now, for example, in live sports commentaries; and this, indeed, is the case here. Since the interlocutor is necessarily co-present with the speaker, it follows then that the addressee “you” is someone other than the reader who is at the location of the old house with the speaker. This is reinforced by the demonstratives in the poem: “this” (stanza ONE clause 1 and stanza TWO clause 5), “the” (stanza ONE clauses 4, 5 and 6), and “here” (stanza ONE clause 2 and stanza TWO clause 6) all have clearly exophoric reference by default. Such reference can make sense only to an interlocutor who is physically with the speaker at the same location and time.

Thus, at the first level of meaning, the poem is a representation of an exchange between a speaker, who may or may not be the poet, and a constructed other at the site of the old house: it is *not* the poet’s direct message to his reader. This being so, at the second level of meaning, the poem is an invitation to respond and react to the attitude of a (possibly) provocative speaker, and to the position of the implied interlocutor—and this, it is to be recalled, with the house as the central focus. It is through this response that is evoked that the deepest meanings of the poem, in part, are realised.

What attitudes, then, does the poem reveal? To begin with, more needs to be said about the Mood structures, in particular, the presence of imperatives. Because an imperative normally carries the function of a command, it implies the speaker’s assumption of superiority in status. There are not one, but three imperatives in the poem, thereby emphasising that the speaker’s attitude towards his interlocutor is one of superiority, perhaps of disdain, or even contempt.

Even the presence of the single interrogative reinforces this. Interrogatives normally imply an invitation to the interlocutor to participate in verbal exchange, hence raising his status to one more equal to the speaker’s. However, in stanza TWO clause 4, this is not the case. There is *grammatical metaphor* here, in this case, *interpersonal metaphor* (see Halliday, 1994, chapter 10). The interrogative here in fact expresses the declarative proposition “It does not matter (if this is your grandfather’s house).” The “question” “so what ...” thus is not a genuine one requiring an answer, but rather, a rhetorical one, functioning more as a marker of attitude—the attitude here being one of contemptuous indifference to the fact that “this is your grandfather’s house.” The declarative proposition is in fact made more attitudinally marked, in other words, through the interpersonal metaphor. Thus again, the addressee’s status in the eyes of the speaker is shown to be so insignificant that a fact related to him is seen as inconsequential.

Examining Subject selection, only twice is the addressee featured in the Subject, and of these two occasions, only once is he the Subject in his own right. The Subject is the “resting point” of the proposition’s “argument” in a clause, that “by reference to which the proposition can be affirmed or denied” (Halliday, 1994, p. 76). That the addressee is hardly the Subject at all in the speaker’s constructions thus reveals that for the speaker, the addressee and his concerns are hardly of interest to him. It is salient now to recall that similarly, only once is the addressee made the Theme directly, in the very same clause in which he is Subject (stanza ONE clause 3). He is implicated in three other Theme selections (in the imperative clauses 4, 5 and 6 of stanza ONE) only because these are actions or behaviours commanded of him by the speaker. Thus he is predominantly neither starting point (Theme) nor resting point (Subject) of the speaker’s concerns, and clearly therefore marginalised by the speaker.

Another pattern of interest that emerges concerns negation. There are two instances of negative polarity in the Finite, one associated with the Subject “they” (the contemporary occupants), the other with the Subject “his ghost.” However, elements of negation may be noted in the Subject or other elements of the verbal group as well. These include the following: the Subjects “nothing” (stanza TWO clauses 8 and 9), “nothing much” (stanza THREE clause 1), and “eyes not tradition” (stanza THREE clause 2), and the verb “dislocate” (stanza TWO clause 3), where the negation is lexical, arising from the meaning of the prefix “dis-.” Clearly, where either Subject or verbal group (through polarity in the Finite or lexically), but not both, contains negation, and there is a Complement, it is the Complement that is negated and the Subject that is the negating agent. Where there is no Complement, then it is the Subject that is negated.

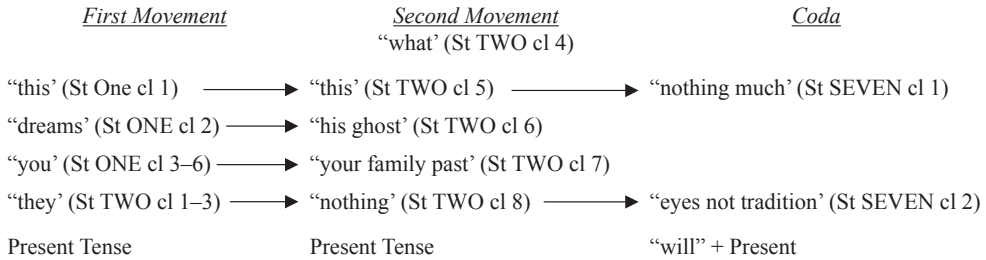
In every instance in the poem, therefore, the negating agent is the third party contemporary force (the contemporary occupants or the abstract forces of the Second Movement), while what is negated has to do with the house, the addressee or “tradition.” What the speaker constructs therefore is a world in which all that is associated with the old world of the house or the addressee is irrelevant in the face of modernity and impotent against the negating forces of the contemporary world.

In summary, the Interpersonal function of the grammar in this poem reveals a speaker with a clear indifference to, even disdain for, his addressee, for whom the house represents a part of his heritage. The addressee is relegated to the nearly inconsequential and therefore marginalised in the speaker’s concerns. Further, the speaker deems the old world of the house, and all that has to do with “tradition” or heritage, irrelevant or impotent, negated by the force of the contemporary. It is this attitude represented in the poem that the reader is invited to judge.

Apart from these aggregate semantic implications of the Mood structure, the patterning of Mood elements also contributes to the overall structuring of the poem, with consequences for larger symbolic articulation of meaning. It is to be noted that in all but one instance, Subject, where it exists, is conflated with Theme, not surprisingly so, since as has been pointed out in the analysis of Theme, there has only been one instance of a truly marked Theme. Thus, abstracting Subject selection, it is also not surprising that the very same overall structure for the poem as in Figure 3 emerges. This is depicted in Figure 4.

It should also be noted also that tense selection also clearly marks out stanza THREE to be a coda of sorts. The selection of the Future Tense against the background of dominant Present Tense selection not only causes stanza THREE clause 1 to be foregrounded, but also marks it clearly to be starting a movement clearly distinct from the first two rather parallel movements. Thus, the case for the overall structure for the poem proposed in Figure 3 appears to be strongly supported by the patterning of Mood elements.

Figure 4: Mood Elements and the Structure of *Old House at Ang Siang Hill*



Ideational Meanings

The ideational meanings of a clause can be analysed through examining in terms of *Transitivity* elements and structures. This involves seeing the clause as a configuration of *Participants* (realized as the nominal groups), *Processes* (realized as the verbal group) and *Circumstances* (realized as adverbs or adverbial groups). SFG further identifies the verbal group as expressing six different Processes—Material Action, Relational, Mental (Thinking, Feeling and Perceiving), Verbal, Behavioural and Existential—each associated with a particular set of Participants (e.g., Actors and Goals with Material Action, Sayers with Verbal Processes). An examination of Transitivity in the poem supports and deepens the conclusions made thus far. The analysis here focuses first on the Participants in the poem.

The various Participants in the poem can be represented as performing either what Hasan (1985) calls the “-er” roles, or what she calls the “-ed” roles. The “-er” roles are generally construed as the active roles in each Process, and the “-ed” roles generally the passive roles, since it is the Participants in the “-er” roles who are responsible in every instance for carrying out the Process. What emerges in the poem is a pattern whose implications are interestingly similar to those of the patterns of Mood.

The addressee features more largely in “-ed” roles. He is featured directly (“you”) as part of the Attribute in a Relational Process (stanza TWO clause 1), and as the Receiver in a Verbal Process (stanza THREE clause 2). He also features indirectly in the Identified element in a Relational Process (“*your* grandfather’s house” in stanza TWO clause 5) and in the Goal of a Material Action (“*your* intentions”). This makes a total of four instances. He is featured directly only once (“you” as Behaver in stanza ONE clause 3), and indirectly also only once (“*your* family past” as Carrier in stanza TWO clause 5).

What this implies is the speaker’s construction of the addressee as largely passive and therefore ineffectual. It is to be noted further that even where the addressee features in “-er” roles, these are relatively passive: referring to Hasan’s (1985) notion of a Cline of Dynamism, the roles of Behaver and Carrier rank low in dynamism, while those of Actor and Sayer, here significantly taken on by other Participants, rank much higher. Further, in one of the “-ed” roles in which he features, the addressee is doubly marginalised by being merely a *part* of the role (stanza TWO clause 1). Thus what emerges is a marginalised and ineffectual addressee: the implication again is that he is largely helpless and irrelevant to the goings-on concerning the house.

Turning now to the selection of Processes in the poem, clear patterning again emerges. The following observations may be made:

- The Behavioural and Material Processes following the first pair of Relationals (stanza ONE clauses 1 and 2) clearly represent responses to these statements about the house expected of

the addressee by the speaker. Thus, together the clauses in stanza ONE form one “move.”

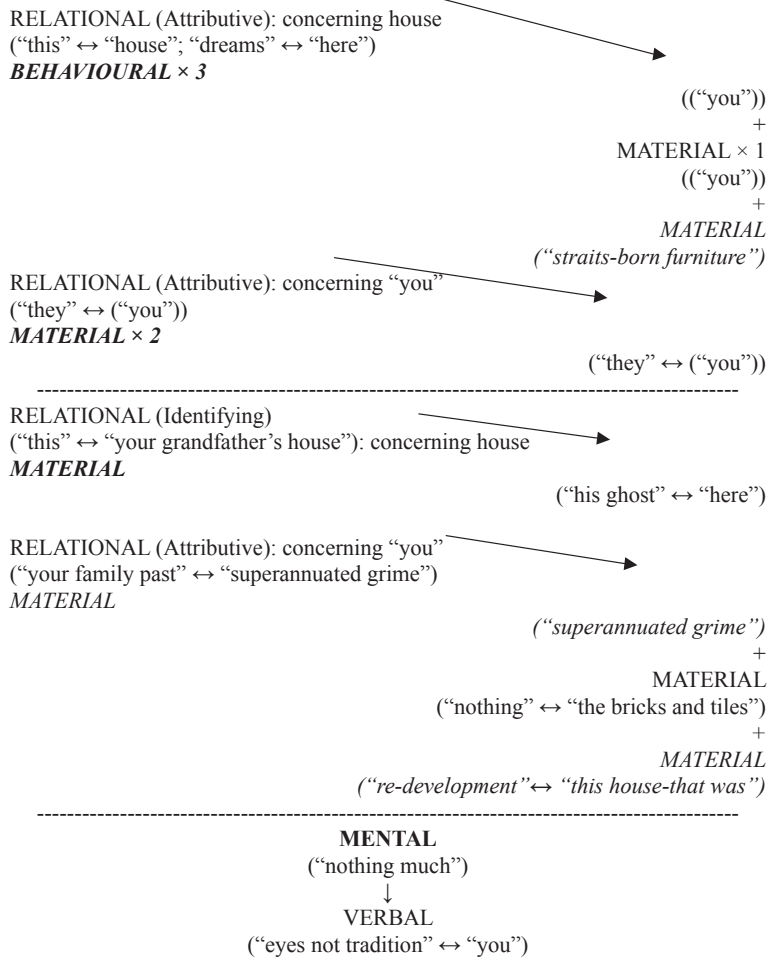
- Similarly, the Material Processes in clauses 2 and 3 in stanza TWO amplify the Relational in stanza TWO clause 1. Thus the three clauses form another “move.”
- In much the same way, clauses 4, 5, and 6 in stanza TWO and clauses 7, 8 and 9 in stanza TWO form distinct “moves” as well, while the Verbal Process of clause 2 in stanza THREE explains the Mental Process of clause 1, so that stanza THREE forms one “move” as well.

These tendencies are captured in Figure 5.

The poem thus consists of a series of four “moves,” initiated each time by a Relational Process and followed by a series of Behavioural or Material Processes, plus one more “move” consisting of a Mental and a Verbal Process. What Figure 5 further reveals is that the first four “moves” actually consist of two pairs: in each case, the first Relational concerns the house, while the second concerns the addressee in some way.

Thus, the patterning of Process patterns seems to suggest the very same overall structure for the poem as the Thematic and Mood patterns. What implications this has for the symbolic

Figure 5: Pattern of Process Patterns in *Old House at Ang Siang Hill*



articulation of the poem's deepest meanings will now be examined in conjunction with foregrounding in the poem.

Foregrounding and the Overall Structure

Some aspects of foregrounding have already been discussed in the examination of the different lexico-grammatical structures. Table 2 presents all the foregrounded clauses in the different structures, with reasons for their foregrounding.

Table 2: Foregrounding in *Old House at Ang Siang Hill*

<u>Thematic Structure:</u>	
<u>Clause</u>	<u>Reason</u>
St ONE cl 1	Marked Topical Theme
St ONE cl 2	Marked Topical Theme
St THREE cl 1	Phenomenon (-ed Participant) as Theme
St THREE cl 2	Sayer as Theme; only post-modified nominal group as Theme
<u>Mood Structure:</u>	
<u>Clause</u>	<u>Reason</u>
St TWO cl 1	Negative Polarity
St TWO cl 6	Negative Polarity
St THREE cl 1	Finite Selection: Modal "will"
St THREE cl 2	Only post-modified nominal group as Subject
<u>Transitivity Structure:</u>	
<u>Clause</u>	<u>Reason</u>
St THREE cl 1	Only Mental Process; no clear <i>-er</i> Participant, explicit or implied
St THREE cl 2	Verbal Process; "you" directly an <i>-ed</i> Participant

Clearly, stanza THREE clause 1 and stanza THREE clause 2 are the most consistently foregrounded clauses. Considering this in conjunction with the overall structure proposed for the poem (Figure 3), where the two clauses have been suggested to form a Coda to two structurally similar movements, it becomes clear that together they form the speaker's most explicit and conclusive statement about the house. It is a grand summary of what he has been aiming at in the drift of the two previous movements. Thus, close heed has to be paid to the attitude he expresses in them, for it is this attitude that the reader is invited to judge.

First, stanza THREE clause 1: "nothing much will be missed." It has been pointed out that the selection of "nothing much" as Theme encodes the old house as the primary concern of the message. However, it has also been noted that the reference to the old house is only implicit. This contrasts with the two earlier instances where the house is Thematised—stanza ONE clause 1 and stanza TWO clause 5—where the reference is explicit, in the first instance directly so, and in the second instance by the cataphoric reference of the demonstrative "this" to the Rheme element of the clause.

Lexically, "nothing much" expresses significance or the lack of it: both words have strong semantic links to the question of significance, "nothing" measuring degree, and "much" being a quantifier. Thus, what becomes salient is not so much the house itself but its *significance*, and it is this, in part, that gives warrant to the reading of the poem as being concerned not so much with just an old house, but with its larger significance. The Thematic foregrounding suggests the symbolic significance of the old house.

Yet what the foregrounding establishes is that this significance is paltry: the reduction of the Theme in its third and most foregrounded appearance to an implicit reference, as well as the lexical choice, suggests this. Moreover, it is foregrounded as Theme by virtue of its Participant role as Phenomenon, an “-ed” role suggesting its inertness and hence ineffectuality to impact anything. Moreover, this Phenomenon is defined in its earlier guises as Theme to be of little significance: in spite of the titular suggestions of history, it is nothing more than “an (i.e., one of many) *unusual* house” (stanza ONE clause 1) inviting the comment “so what” (stanza TWO clauses 4 and 5—see earlier discussion of clause 4). The speaker’s disdain for the house is clear.

From an Interpersonal perspective, the foregrounding of the modal “will” needs exploration. The modal is predictive, and highly so. Prediction is the prerogative of the prophet, while high modality is indicative of the speaker’s assumption of superior social status. Thus, on the one hand, the poem seems concerned with making a prophetic statement; on the other, this prophetic statement is made by a speaker who arrogates himself to not just a position of superior social status, but to the position of prophet as well. This attitude invites negative judgement by the reader, and thus, the prophetic point may in fact become ironically made: the *poet* can be seen to suggest that much *will* be missed.

Finally, the Transitivity structure encodes in this clause a Mental Process. This Mental Process is foregrounded against all other Processes in the poem, suggesting that, in the end, the poem is concerned foremost with how the house and its status is perceived: all else forms a background to this concern. The Mental Process is, in fact, one of *Affection*: the concern of the poem is less with cognitive evaluations than with feelings towards the house and what it represents. It must also be pointed out that the Senser (i.e., who or what carries out the Mental Process) is significantly omitted in the clause: the use of the passive voice allows this, and to the speaker’s advantage. The omission of agency surreptitiously implicates even the addressee in the prophecy’s generalising force: nothing much will be missed by anyone, including the addressee. The blatantly sweeping nature of the prophecy thus again invites judgement, and possibly makes an ironic point.

What of stanza THREE clause 2 (“eyes not tradition tell you this”)? It establishes not just the symbolic intentions of the text, but the speaker’s final arrogation and definitive attitude.

Thematically, it is foregrounded by the experiential role of the Theme as Sayer, the only instance in which this is the case. The Sayer is the personified “eyes,” clearly a lexical metaphor for objective reality. But the metaphor also connotes through personification the notion of a seer, an all-knowing prophet. Considering the implications of the foregrounding of “will” in stanza THREE clause 1, the arrogation of the speaker is complete. At one and the same time, his prophetic pronouncement in the previous clause is ascribed to objective reality, and he asserts his status as seer with equal status to such a reality.

The clause is also foregrounded in terms of its concurrent Theme and Subject by post-modification in its nominal group, again the only instance in which this is so. The post-modification takes the form of negation, and what is negated is “tradition.” Semantically, the biggest links the word has in the poem are to “old house” in the title and to “your family past” (stanza TWO clause 7), which, in any case, also links anaphorically to “your grandfather’s house” (stanza TWO clause 5). Thus, it owes its coherence in the poem to such links. Tradition, in other words, is defined in the text in terms of the house. It is thus this foregrounded clause that establishes conclusively that the house is to be understood as a symbol of tradition, hence also establishing that the poem has a second level of sayings beyond talk about a house. The speaker’s disdain for the house and for his addressee is disdain for tradition and for those associated with tradition.

Finally, the clause is foregrounded experientially by the selection of a Verbal Process and

by the addressee “you” having the Participant role of Receiver. The former, in tandem with the foregrounding of its Theme and Subject, emphasises the symbolic status of the text as a saying or comment on tradition. It is not the exchange between speaker and silent addressee over the house that is of importance, but what that exchange as a whole says about tradition. With respect to “you” being Receiver, again the speaker’s reduction of the addressee is complete. As a passive receiver of comment, not only is the addressee told what to do (recall the imperatives in stanza ONE clauses 4 to 6): he is told what to think. His thoughts and his very ability to think are dismissed, and his marginalisation is complete.

Holistically, the consistency of foregrounding of the two clauses of stanza THREE makes the general import of the speaker’s sayings clear. Forget about the house—tradition does not matter, and in any case, if you look around, you will see that you can’t do anything about it.

If there is any doubt that this is the theme of the speaker’s sayings, the characterisation of the overall structure of the text (see Figures 3, 4 and 5) shows it to be an argument leading up to this. The following commentary, whose parallels should be noted, illustrates this:

- In the First Movement, the argument is presented in human terms:
 - The house is pointed out, but as merely one unusual house, not one of historical significance as possibly suggested by the title.
 - Its possible significance to human consciousness (the collective consciousness?) is invoked by associating it with dreams.
 - The addressee, a human, who we later discover has links to its past, is told to act reverentially (“softly,” “gently,” “quietly”) with respect to it, but
 - then is told of the intransigence of the human, contemporary occupants.
 - Thus, contemporary humans disarm (“dislocate”) those of the past.
- In the Second Movement, the argument is generalised into abstract terms:
 - The house is invoked again, but with a dismissive comment (“so what”) about its ancestral relevance (“your grandfather’s house”) to the addressee.
 - Its present relevance to the addressee’s consciousness is dismissed (“his ghost doesn’t live here anymore”).
 - The addressee’s heritage (“your family past”), normally to be revered, is dismissed as “superannuated grime which increases with time.”
 - The contemporary is asserted to have nothing to “add or subtract” to the house.
- Thus, the Coda aggregates the linear (within each movement) and spiral (from the real and human in the First Movement to the abstract and general in the Second) logic to reach the conclusions above implied by its consistently foregrounded clauses.

Given the general import of the speaker’s sayings, the apparent contradictions mentioned in the introduction to this analysis then resolve themselves. Stanza ONE is largely ironic, the speaker’s cynical remarks to the marginalised addressee—the “dreams” are not the hopes of the immigrant generation, but mere illusions, the injunctions to reverential behaviour and actions mere mockery, underscored by the subtle implication of deference to the contemporary (“speak quietly to the contemporary occupants” who are “not afraid of you”). In a clever subterfuge, the reader of the poem is deceived into its apparent reverence for the house until the speaker’s mask is off, and he is provoked by the speaker to re-evaluate the reverence.

Summary of Second Level Meanings

In summary, the consistent foregrounding establishes not only the existence of a second level thematic significance for the poem, but also what that significance is. It does so at two levels:

- It establishes that *the speaker's sayings in themselves* make a second level thematic comment on the place of tradition and those for whom tradition might have significance, in the face of contemporary realities. In brief, tradition and those who might hold it dear are dismissed as inconsequential in the face of contemporary reality.
- This, however, is not the *poem's saying as discourse with the reader*. The consistency of foregrounding also establishes earlier tendencies implied by the lexicogrammar about the interpersonal features of the text, in particular, about the attitude of the speaker and the position of the addressee. Thus, as discourse with the reader, the foregrounding invites judgement from the reader about the speaker's thematic sayings and attitudes. The largest frame of thematic concern therefore is with attitudes to tradition rather than with tradition itself.

It would seem that the judgement invited would involve repudiation in view of the generally repugnant attitude of the speaker, and the marginalisation of the addressee. However, since there are no fully explicit grounds for such a repudiation, what is ultimately most important with regard to the second level of semiosis is the invitation to interrogate the asserted viewpoint. At its most fundamental level, the poem's theme, with respect to the place of tradition is "Judge for yourself."

Implications Of The Analysis

National Education and broad human concerns

The analysis reveals that quite apart from its ability to provoke further exploration of significant national history because of its intertextual allusions, the poem is highly relevant to deeper, more meaningful exploration of themes related to tradition, heritage and change, fundamental concerns of National Education anywhere in the world. These are, no doubt, also themes of broader human concern, and thus the poem can serve the ends of those with more universalistic concerns. However, its setting in a known but transformed local historical location makes its themes more immediately and socially relevant.

More importantly, the poem engages at the level of theme discussion of attitudes to these universal and social concerns. This makes it even more fundamentally relevant to National Education, since it can be said that the ultimate concern of National Education is not with knowledge and ideas, but with the formation of attitudes.

Critical Thinking

Moreover, as the analysis demonstrates, the issues and attitudes involve complex questions of social positions, attitudes, human consciousness, ontology—to name a few—in relation to the question of tradition, thus indicating the poem is a goldmine of potential for deep discussion.

Most significantly, this poem is particularly of relevance and potential to critical thinking. The analysis shows the speaker to interrogate conventional notions of the worth and sanctity of tradition, thus modelling for students a habit of provocative thinking. Yet, at the same time, the poem in turn invites through its grammar active interrogation by readers and students of the speaker's high-handed attitude and perspective, thus motivating and offering opportunity for the practice of critical thinking and evaluation.

It might be added here that this poem was written against the backdrop of pragmatic governmental advocacy of urban renewal at the cost of heritage. Although this is no longer the case, the interrogation in the original context of creation of official values (implied in the invitation to interrogate the speaker) suggests the application by the pupils of such interrogation to similar real

life contexts. Indeed, this aspect of the original context might be highlighted to the students.

Aesthetic worth

The rich relevance and potential of the poem is possible because of its highly sophisticated, subtle artistry of verbal construction. Complex layers of semiosis are involved, from the literal to the speaker's thematic sayings, to the symbolic articulation of the poem to the reader. Thus, the case for Singaporean Literature in the curriculum, in aesthetic terms is strengthened. The poem can be used to raise aesthetic sensitivity.

The centrality of language

Finally, the analysis offers or indicates the pedagogical means by which the various relevancies and potentials above might be realised, in particular the means to engage in critical interrogation. It suggests that whatever particular approaches are taken, a central focus on language and its resources must be involved. Critical interrogation of the speaker's attitude to tradition, for instance, may be achieved through the deconstruction of language in ways suggested by this analysis.

Given the important role of context, and given the curiosity the language can provoke, language-focused activities might be supplemented by activities related to the discovery or provision of contextual background. Alternatively, the language-focused teaching of the poem might be planned to augment or take advantage of existing teaching in other subjects that might relate to the history of the poem, for example, a history lesson on immigrant forefathers. This would directly further National Education objectives.

With or without such supplementary activities, the importance of language to the study of the poem and the deep usefulness of the study of the poem to language learning is clear, and the place of Literature can again be justified to those with such concerns.

The Last Word

In spite of Arthur Yap's own protestation that "I'm not a person who wants to write poems with a political basis or social basis, commenting on society as such" (quoted in Griffiths, 1997, p.15), it is clear *Old House at Ang Siang Hill* is a poem with powerful national and social relevance, capable of provoking searching critique because of its verbal artistry. It is a powerful argument for Literature's relevance in the secondary school classroom in Singapore, and anywhere else in the world, through more socially and culturally appropriate texts.

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